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## SITUATIONS WANTED

BY BRANDER MATTHEWS

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In a forgotten book by a forgotten British bard, in the *Gillot and Goosequill* of Henry S. Leigh, we may read the appealing plaint of a playwright who felt that his invention was failing and who could no longer find the succession of poignant episodes that the drama demands:

Ten years I've workt my busy brain  
In drama for the million;  
I don't aspire to Drury Lane,  
Nor stoop to the Pavilion.  
I've sought materials low and high  
To edify the nation;  
At last the fount is running dry—  
I want a situation.

I've known the day when wicked earls  
Who made improper offers  
To strictly proper village girls,  
Could fill a house's coffers.  
The lowly peasant could create  
A wonderful sensation.  
Such people now are out of date—  
I want a situation.

The writer of these despondent stanzas had had a hand in a play or two but he was by profession a lyrist and not a dramatist; and it may be doubted whether any of the born dramatists would ever have sent forth this cry of distress, since fecundity is a necessary element in their endowment. The major dramatic poets have always been affluent in their productivity; Sophocles and Shakespeare and Molière appear to have averaged two plays in every year of their ripe maturity. It is true, of course, that they had no scruple in taking their material wherever they might find it, not only despoiling their predecessors of single situations,

but on occasion helping themselves to a complete plot, ingeniously invented, adroitly constructed; and needing only to be transformed and transfigured by their interpreting imagination.

We like to think that in these modern days our dramatists are more conscientious in the acquisition of their raw material and that they can withstand the temptation to appropriate an entire plot or even a ready-made situation. When Sardou was scientifically interrogated by a physiological psychologist as to his methods of composition, he evidently took pleasure in declaring that he had in his notebooks dozens of skeleton stories, needing only to be articulated a little more artfully and then to be clothed with words. Probably no one of the playwrights of the second half of the nineteenth century was more fertile in invention than Sardou; and not a few effective situations originally devised by him have been utilized by playmakers in other countries,—one from *La Haine*, for instance, in *The Conquerors*, and one from *La Tosca* in *The Darling of the Gods*. Notwithstanding this notorious originality, Sardou was frequently accused of levying on the inventions of others, without recompense or even acknowledgment; and more than once the accusers caught him “with the goods on him”—if this expressive phrase is permissible. *Les Pommes du Voisin*, for example, was traced to a story of Charles de Bernard’s, *Fernande* to a tale of Diderot’s, and *Fedora* to a novel of Adolphe Bélot’s. As it happened, Bélot had dramatized his novel, and when he saw that Sardou had borrowed and bettered his plot, he made no outcry; he contented himself with arranging for a revival of his play so that the similarity of its story to Sardou’s might be made immediately manifest.

When Mario Uchard asserted that the dominant situation in his *La Fiammina* had been lifted by Sardou for service in *Georgette*, Sardou retorted by citing three or four earlier pieces and stories in which an identical situation could be found. Those who seek equity must come into court with clean hands; and Uchard lost his case. Nevertheless the impression left upon at least one reader of the testimony was that Uchard had no knowledge of the forgotten fictions which Sardou disinterred, that he believed himself to be the inventor of the situation in dispute, and that Sardou probably did derive it from Uchard, although possibly he may have invented it independently.

The fact is indisputable that the number of situations fit for service on the stage is not infinite but rigorously restricted. Gozzi declared that there were only thirty-six, and when Goethe and Schiller sought to ascertain these, they could not fill out the list. M. Georges Polti accepted Gozzi's figure and after indefatigable investigation of several thousand plays, ancient and modern, he catalogued the three dozen with all their available corollaries. Of course, scientific certainty is not attainable in such a counting up; there may be fifty-seven varieties or even ninety and nine. The playwrights of this generation have to grind the grist already ground by their predecessors a generation earlier; they may borrow boldly, that is to say, they may be aware that what they are doing has been done before, or they may be innocently original, fondly believing themselves to be the inventors of a novel predicament, unaware that it was second-hand a score of centuries before they were born.

There is the *Romeo and Juliet* situation, for instance—the course of true love made to run rough by the bitter hostility of the parents. We can find that in *Huckleberry Finn* in the nineteenth century, and we can also find it in the *Antigone*, more than two thousand years earlier; and we may rest assured that Mark Twain did not go to Sophocles for it, or even to Shakespeare. It is probably to be found in the fiction of every language, dead and alive; and those who employ it now do so without giving a thought to any of its many earlier users. The theme is common property, to be utilized at will by anybody anywhere and anywhen.

During the run of *The Chorus Lady* in New York I happened to call the attention of Bronson Howard to the identity of its culminating situation with that in *Lady Windermere's Fan*. A young woman foolishly adventures herself in the apartment of a man, whereupon an older woman goes there to rescue her; then when the younger woman is summoned to come out of the inner room in which she has taken refuge, it is the older woman who appears, thus placing herself in a compromising position in the eyes of the man whom she is expecting to marry. "Don't forget that I had had it in *One of Our Girls*," Howard remarked, without in any way suggesting that Oscar Wilde had despoiled him, or that Mr. James Forbes had lifted the situation from either of his predecessors. Then I recalled that I had seen it in an unacted play, *Faith*, by H. C. Bunner, the story of

which he had taken as the basis of a novel entitled *A Woman of Honor*. Knowing Bunner and Howard intimately, I felt certain that they had no doubt as to their right to utilize this situation, and that if either of them had been conscious of any indebtedness to any specific predecessor they would have declared it frankly.

Bronson Howard, on the playbill of *The Henrietta*, acknowledged the borrowing of a situation from *Vanity Fair*; he was moved to this confession because in this case he happened to know where he had found the situation. He knew that it was borrowed, and not his own invention. A confession equally complete and of a somewhat larger import is to be found in the author's note prefixed to Maeterlinck's play, *Marie Magdeleine*:

I have borrowed from M. Paul Heyse's drama, *Maria von Magdala*, the idea of two situations in my play; namely, at the end of the first act, the intervention of Christ, who stops the crowd raging against Mary Magdalene, with these words, spoken behind the scenes: 'He that is without sin among you let him cast the first stone'; and in the third the dilemma in which the great sinner finds herself of saving or destroying the Son of God, according as she consents or refuses to give herself to a Roman. Before setting to work I asked the venerable German poet, whom I hold in the highest esteem, for his permission to develop those two situations, which, so to speak, were merely sketched in his play, with its incomparably richer plot than mine; and offered to recognize his rights in whatever manner he thought proper. My respectful request was answered with a refusal, none too courteous, I regret to say, and almost threatening. From that moment, I was bound to consider that the words from the Gospel, quoted above, are common property; and that the dilemma of which I speak is one of those which occur pretty frequently in dramatic literature. It seemed to me the more lawful to make use of it inasmuch as I had happened to imagine it in the fourth act of *Joyzelle* in the same year in which *Maria von Magdala* was published and before I was able to become acquainted with that play.

Then the Belgian poet declared that except in so far as these two situations were concerned, his play had absolutely nothing in common with the German drama. "Having said this," Maeterlinck concluded, "I am happy to express to the aged master my gratitude for an intellectual benefit, which is not the less great for being involuntary."

This note calls for two comments. The first is that although the words from the Gospel are common property, still it was Heyse who first applied them to Mary Magdalene; and the second is that although the dilemma that Mae-

terlinck wanted to borrow from *Maria von Magdala* was one that he had already imagined in *Joyzelle*, and one that could be found not infrequently in earlier plays, notably in *La Tosca* of Sardou, in the *Dame aux Camélias* of the younger Dumas and in the *Marion Delorme* of Victor Hugo, still it was Heyse who first had the happy thought of putting this dilemma up to Mary Magdalene. When the Belgian poet persisted in making his profit out of these two inventions of the German story-teller, he may have seemed to some rather high-handed in his forcible rectification of his frontier by the annexation of territory already profitably occupied by his neighbor. To this, it is only fair to answer that the application of the Gospel words and the propounding of this special dilemma to Mary Magdalene were so natural as to be almost necessary, if her story was to be shaped for the stage and sustained by a satisfactory struggle. They are so natural and so necessary that M. Maeterlinck might almost have been expected to invent them for himself if he had not found them already invented by Heyse.

Bronson Howard would have held that M. Maeterlinck was absolutely within his right in taking over from Herr Heyse what was necessary for the improvement of his own play, if only he declared the indebtedness honestly and if he offered to pay for it. And no playwright was ever more scrupulous in acknowledging his own indebtedness than Howard. The situation which he took from *Vanity Fair*, for use in *The Henrietta*, he might have invented easily enough or he might have found it in half a dozen other places besides Thackeray's novel; but, as he was aware that it had been suggested to him by Thackeray's novel, he simply had to say so—just as, many years earlier, on the playbill of his *Moorcroft*, he had credited the suggestion of its plot to a story by John Hay, although this source was so remote that Hay was able to say to me that he never would have suspected it except for the note on the programme.

When I assert that Howard might easily enough have invented for himself the situation he borrowed from Thackeray, I am supported by my own experience. I invented that situation, quite forgetful of the fact that I must once have been familiar with it in *Vanity Fair*; and I made it the center of a one-act comedy, *This Picture and That*, written almost simultaneously with *The Henrietta*. Only after the performance of my little piece and only when I saw How-

ard's play with its note of acknowledgment to Thackeray, did I feel called upon to doubt my own originality. A few years thereafter I had the pleasure and the profit of collaborating with Howard in the composition of *Peter Stuyvesant, Governor of New Amsterdam*, and when we were still engaged in the arduous and delightful task of putting together our plot, of setting our characters upright upon their feet, and of seeking situations in which they might reveal themselves effectively, I chanced to suggest that we might perhaps utilize a situation in a certain French drama. I have forgotten the situation and the title of the play in which it appeared. I made the suggestion doubtfully, as its acceptance might lay us open to the accusation of plagiarism.

Howard promptly waved aside my scruples by a declaration of principle: "When I am at work on a play," he explained, "my duty as an artist is to make that play just as good as I can, to construct it as perfectly as possible, no matter where I get my materials. If this situation you suggest is one which will help our play, we must take it without hesitation. Our scenario is certain to be greatly modified before we are satisfied with it and ready to begin on the actual writing; and very likely we shall find that this borrowed situation, which to-day seems to us helpful, will not survive to the final revision; it may have led us to something finer and then itself disappeared. But if, when the play is done at last, we are face to face with the fact that one of our situations came to us from somebody else—then our duty as honest men begins. We must give due credit on the playbill when the piece is performed and in the book when it is published. Furthermore, if the somebody from whom we have borrowed is alive, if he has rights, either legal or moral, we must secure his permission, paying whatever may be necessary."

Bronson Howard was as candid as he was clear-eyed; and the principle he declared is one by which every dramatist would do well to govern himself. If a playwright should be exceedingly scrupulous and seek to avoid the use of any situation invented and utilized by any one of his predecessors in the long history of playmaking, he would soon find himself at a standstill and in a blind alley; he would discover speedily that unused situations are very scarce. The playwright must perforce resign himself to the employment of those which have already seen service. Where there is spe-

cific obligation he should acknowledge it frankly—unless, indeed, the borrowed situation is so well known that acknowledgment may seem a work of supererogation. It is instantly obvious that the *Rantzau* of Erckmann-Chatrian is an Alsatian *Romeo and Juliet*, and that the *André Cornélis* of M. Paul Bourget is a Parisian *Hamlet*; these resemblances were so very evident that they could not be denied and therefore need not be declared.

With characteristic wisdom and with a liberality as characteristic, Goethe held that what was really important was not where a situation came from but what use was made of it. He noted that Scott had helped himself to a situation from *Egmont*, and “because he did it well, he deserves praise.” We may be sure that Goethe would have only commendation for the skill with which the Jacobean playwrights despoiled the Spanish stage, because these gifted Englishmen always bettered what they borrowed. In his illuminating little book on the *Spanish Drama*, George Henry Lewes called attention to the imaginative energy with which Fletcher, in the *Custom of the Country*, transformed an ingeniously contrived situation in Calderon’s *Mejor esta que Estaba* into one of the most superbly dramatic scenes in all drama.

In the Spanish piece, Don Carlos rushes in and begs Flora to conceal him and save his life. She has no sooner hidden him than his pursuers enter—to tell her that they have followed into the house a cavalier who has just killed her cousin. She keeps her promise to protect the hidden fugitive; and she tells those who are seeking him that he sprang from the window into the garden and so escaped. This is an effective scene; but it is infinitely inferior to that made out of it by Fletcher (possibly aided by Massinger). Donna Guiomar is alone in her bed-chamber; she is anxious about her absent son and she kneels in prayer. Rutilio rushes in. He is a stranger,

—a most unfortunate stranger,  
That, called unto it by my enemy’s pride,  
Have left him dead in the streets. Justice pursues me,  
And for that life I took unwillingly,  
And in a fair defense, I must lose mine,  
Unless you, in your charity, protect me.  
Your house is now my sanctuary!



Donna Guiomar agrees to shelter him and bids him hide himself in the hangings of her bed, saying:

Be of comfort;  
Once more I give my promise for your safety.  
All men are subject to such accidents,  
Especially the valiant;—and who knows not,  
But that the charity I afford this stranger,  
My only son elsewhere may stand in need of.

Then enter officers and servants with a bier whereon a body lies lifeless; and a servant declares that

Your only son,  
My lord Duarte's slain!

And an officer explains that

his murderer,  
Pursued by us, was by a boy discovered  
Entering your house.

The noble mother, stricken to the heart, is true to her promise. She tells the officers to go forth and search for the murderer. Then at last, when she is left alone with the corpse of her son, she orders the concealed slayer to make his escape:

Come fearless forth! But let thy face be cover'd,  
That I hereafter be not forc'd to know thee!

This is an incomparable example of the deep difference between the theatrically effective and the truly dramatic—between adroit story-telling on the stage for the sake of the story itself, and story-telling for the sake of the characters immeshed in the situation. The incident invented by Calderon is ingenious and it provides a shock of surprise and a thrill of suspense; but how much richer and nobler is the situation as Fletcher improved it, and how superbly did he phrase the motive and the emotion of the stricken mother! The Jacobean poet achieved surprise and suspense and also a larger significance, because he had imagination to project the scene as a whole, to prepare it, to express its ultimate value, and to end it to the keen satisfaction of the spectators.

The younger Dumas, a playmaker of surprising skill, was once persuaded to rewrite a play by Emile de Girardin, the *Supplice d'une Femme*. The original author protested that he could not recognize his piece in the new version. Dumas

explained that the original play had been cast aside because it was a poor piece of work, quite impossible on the stage. But it had a central situation which Dumas declared to be very interesting and very dramatic; and therefore Dumas had written a new play to present this novel and powerful situation so as to make it effective in the theatre, which was precisely what Girardin had been incapable of doing, although he had invented the situation.

"But a situation is not an idea," Dumas explained in the article in which he justified his rejection of Girardin's plot and construction. "An idea has a beginning, a middle and an end—an exposition, a development and a conclusion. Anybody may happen on a dramatic situation; but it must be prepared for, it must be made possible and acceptable; and above all, the knot must be untied logically." Then Dumas illustrated these assertions by suggesting the kind of dramatic situation which anybody might happen on. A young man falls in love with a girl; he asks her hand; and they are married. Then, and only then, at the very moment when he is about to bear her away to their future home, he learns categorically that he has married his own sister. "There's a situation! and very interesting indeed. But how are you going to get out of it? I give you a thousand guesses—and then I give you the situation itself, if you want it. He who can start with this and make a good play out of it will be the real author of that play, and I shall claim no share in it."

The situation around which Girardin had written the *Supplice d'une Femme* was difficult and it was dangerous; but it was not impossible. Dumas was able to find a way out and to bestow upon the story an attractive exposition, a highly emotional development and a conclusion at once logical and acceptable to a profitable succession of audiences. And this is just what one of the established American dramatists was able to do recently for a novice who had happened on a strong and striking situation. The piece in which the prentice playwright had put his situation was promptly rejected by all the managers, until at last in despair he went to the older dramatist for advice. He had placed his powerful situation in the first act, so that it was inadequately prepared for and led up to, while its superior force and weight prevented his giving to the later acts the increasing force which later acts ought to possess. The remedy suggested by the

more experienced dramatist was simple; it was to begin and to end the story earlier—to cancel the original second and third acts and to compose a new first and second act to lead up to the strong and striking situation which could then be amply developed in the new third and last act to be made out of the material in the original first act.

In *Rupert of Hentzau*, the sequel to the *Prisoner of Zenda*, there is a superb situation which needed to be solved and which cried aloud for poetic treatment. Rudolph Rassendyll looks almost exactly like the King of Ruritania. In the *Prisoner of Zenda* circumstances force him to take the King's place and to be crowned in his stead; so it is that he meets the King's cousin, the Princess Flavia, and falls in love with her and she with him. In *Rupert of Hentzau* we find that the Princess, for reasons of state, has married her cousin; and then circumstances again force Rassendyll to personate the King, who is suddenly murdered and his body burnt. What is Rassendyll to do? Shall he accept the throne and take with it the Queen who loves him and whom he loves? The Queen begs him to do this for her sake. If he decides to profit by this series of accidents then he must for the rest of his life live a lie, knowing that he is holding that to which he has no right, legal or moral.

Here is the stuff out of which serious drama is made; here is one of the great passionate crises of existence, when, in Stevenson's phrase, "duty and inclination come nobly to the grapple." Here is an ethical dilemma demanding a large and lofty poetic treatment—like that which Fletcher bestowed on the situation he borrowed from Calderon. Unfortunately the author of the story was unable to rise to this exalted altitude; and he got out of the difficulty by a tame device, which simply dodged the difficulty. Before the hero can declare his decision he is assassinated. The author had happened on a fine situation; he was adroit in his exposition of it and in his development; but he failed to find a fit conclusion.

Perhaps, in the course of time, when the hour strikes for a rebirth of the poetic drama, a dramatic poet of a later generation—a poet who is truly a playwright and a playwright who is really a poet—will be tempted to take over this situation invented by the ingenious novelist; and he may be able to discover a satisfactory conclusion and to treat it with the interpreting imagination it demands.